



Tomorrow's Battle

Story by SGT Mike Kieser Photos by Ray Barnard

LIVING in bombed-out ruins, the “Cortinians” are a product of terrorism and savage warfare. Dirt roads winding through their sparsely populated towns are lined with derelict automobiles. The twisted metal carcasses are casualties of car bombings or artillery fire. Incapable of providing transportation, they now lay curbside — useful only as concealment for forces under fire.

U.S. soldiers deployed to “Cortina” have seen the human cost of warfare, too. The Cortinians want help

but seem angry and fearful that the Americans may bring more destruction to the country’s schools and hospitals, or invade people’s homes.

The Cortinians are a fictional people who exist only as part of the battle scenarios fought at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, La., the Army’s light infantry forces training center that emphasizes joint-service teamwork.

Building on the success of the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., which began training armored and mechanized forces in 1981, the JRTC was initially established at Fort Chaffee, Ark., in 1987. JRTC moved to Fort Polk 10 years ago this month.

SGT Mike Kieser works for the Fort Polk Public Affairs Office.

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Training scenarios at JRTC are “fought” in contemporary operating environments, integrating changing world conditions and lessons learned from real-world conflict.

That emphasis on realism and the feedback provided by professional observer-controllers are used to create a training environment tailored for light-infantry, special-forces and ranger units, but the center also integrates training with heavy armored units, the Air Force and, more recently, the Navy and Marine Corps.

CSM Michael O’Neil, a member of the 172nd Infantry Brigade at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, has participated in eight JRTC rotations. During a recent rotation O’Neil said that the opposition force — the 1st Battalion, 509th Inf. Regiment — has continuously provided a difficult and robust enemy in a constantly changing battlefield. The combination of the enemy, terrain and battlefield distracters are what makes

rotations work, he said.

“As JRTC has progressed, it has gotten more realistic. Civilians on the battlefield have been integrated well. The enemy is smart and likes to kill people. He puts up obstacles and cuts lines of communication. The OPFOR wants to get to you and has had to improve as

time has added experience and technology to the mixture. They do very well,” O’Neil said.

No “cookie-cutter” template is used to train units at JRTC — each rotation provides a different scenario, said CSM Angel Febles of the JRTC Operations Group. This allows training to adapt over time and reflect changes seen in real-world missions.

“I’ve heard soldiers who have been in combat say ‘I’ve seen this before — it’s a JRTC fight,’” Febles said. “In Iraq and Afghanistan we’ve seen suicide and vehicle bombs, humanitarian-aid missions, and civilians and media on the battlefield. All of those are intricately woven into a rotation here.”

While rotations are never the same, Febles said, all units training at JRTC will fight at the Shughart-Gordon MOUT site. The urban conditions soldiers encounter there provide a glimpse into the environment in which today’s and tomorrow’s battles will likely be fought.

Walking through Shughart-Gordon, soldiers see a town complete with automobiles, buildings, villagers and more.

“We never train the same way twice, but we will always do a MOUT battle. It’s essential,” Febles said. “The world is getting more and more populated, and people aren’t spread out like they once were. In the future, we will fight in urban areas more than ever.”

While training continues at JRTC, it’s impossible for units to predict how an upcoming rotation will be conducted. Their best bet may be to keep an eye on current events. What happens in the world today is what will shape the battles fought in Cortina tomorrow. 🚩

◀ JRTC’s high-tech MOUT site realistically recreates the sights, sounds and challenges of military operations in an urban environment.

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Ray Bernard



▶ More than 1,000 cameras monitor the action at the MOUT site.

◀ Every rotational unit either attacks or defends the MOUT site. Either way, the training is tough and realistic.